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REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATING TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: AN INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION

Information received from the Inter-agency Support Group for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Introduction

1. In its resolution 2000/22 of 28 July 2000, the Economic and Social Council decided to establish the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues with the mandate to discuss indigenous issues relating to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. In particular, the Permanent Forum is asked to provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the Council, as well as to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations, through the Council, to raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities relating to indigenous issues within the United Nations system, and to prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues.

2. In the light of the Council decision, representatives of the United Nations system met on numerous occasions during 2001 to consider the implications of the establishment of the Permanent Forum for their activities. The representatives included staff from United Nations departments, organizations, funds and programmes, specialized agencies and international financial institutions. In the first place, representatives welcomed the creation of the new body, believing that it would be a valuable source of advice. They decided to consider ways in which the institutions they represented could contribute to the success of the Forum. It was understood that one of the principal purposes of the Forum was to provide advice, through the

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Council, to the United Nations system. That meant that the United Nations system had an interest in ensuring that the advice that might be provided would contribute to the goals set out in the resolution: to promote integration and coordination of activities relating to indigenous peoples. It is further noted that the establishment of the Permanent Forum is one of the objectives of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, whose goal is the strengthening of international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous peoples in such areas as human rights, health, education, and development and the environment.

3. The purpose of the present paper is: (a) to provide information about the Inter-agency Support Group for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; (b) to introduce the written submissions specifically prepared by the United Nations system for the first session of the Permanent Forum; and (c) to offer some preliminary comments for the consideration of the members of the Permanent Forum in order to contribute to a fruitful dialogue with the United Nations system. The members of the Permanent Forum will also have other matters that they wish to review and the present proposals are meant only as a contribution to stimulate constructive debate. The United Nations system looks forward to being an active partner of the Forum.

Inter-agency Support Group

4. Following the decision by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to assign the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as the lead agency in the preparations for the Permanent Forum, the High Commissioner wrote to all United Nations system organizations to seek their cooperation. During the course of 2001, a number of informal consultations were held among representatives of organizations of the United Nations system. The High Commissioner, in addition to meeting with representatives of the United Nations system, also discussed the Permanent Forum with heads of United Nations system organizations. The exchange of views among United Nations organizations and specialized agencies and between the United Nations system and Governments, indigenous peoples and NGOs led to the view that a formal arrangement was needed to develop an inter-agency approach for both the preparations for and the follow-up to the Permanent Forum.

5. On 23 and 24 January 2002, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights hosted a meeting of the focal points on indigenous issues of organizations of the United Nations system and United Nations departments to consider the implications of the Permanent Forum for their work. The Inter-agency Support Group for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (ISG) was established in order to support the objectives of the Forum, contribute towards preparations for its first and subsequent sessions, and analyse recommendations addressed to the United Nations system with a view to facilitating comprehensive and coordinated responses at national, regional and international levels.

6. The departments and organizations participating in the Inter-agency Support Group at present are: Department of Public Information (DPI), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), International Labour Office (ILO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund, (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World

Health Organization (WHO), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), UN-Habitat, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. The ISG agreed to meet at least twice a year.

7. The representatives of the participating departments and organizations share a common commitment: to work within their respective mandates with, and for the benefit of, indigenous peoples. It was thought that the Forum would offer an opportunity to exchange information about existing programmes and projects within the United Nations system, maximize resources and knowledge, and enhance inter-agency cooperation in matters relating to indigenous peoples. There was an expectation that the Forum might also make a contribution to the broader goals of the United Nations as set out in the Charter.

Documentation provided by the United Nations system

8. The participating members of the ISG have provided brief papers on their current work, which are circulated in the form of addenda to the present document, in order to facilitate discussions under item 6 of the provisional agenda. The ISG did not know what written information concerning organizations of the United Nations would be needed by the members of the Forum at its first session. However, it was felt that short explanatory papers providing basic information supported by supplementary documentation in the room would allow greater time to be spent on focused discussions on programmes and policies.

9. The members of the Forum are invited to discuss with representatives of United Nations system organizations the kinds of documentation that could be prepared for the second session.

Developing an interactive dialogue

10. The ISG discussed ways in which the Forum might be able to develop a fruitful interchange among members, observers and the United Nations system under this item of the provisional agenda. It was felt that sessions of the Forum could be organized on an interactive basis, allowing for all participants to share views and experiences in the interest of formulating workable solutions.

11. An example of such an approach might be to hold panel discussions on specific themes within the mandate of the Forum (development, economic and social issues, education, etc.) or on cross-cutting questions such as policy guidelines or technical cooperation relevant to all United Nations system organizations. The relevant United Nations organizations would be invited to make technical presentations and the members of the Forum would then have time to raise questions, share their experiences and discuss proposals. Following this more restricted discussion, observers could then make their contribution. Such a two-tiered approach may allow for a more dynamic interaction and results-oriented exchange. However, there are a number of other ways to stimulate such an interactive dialogue and members of the Forum will determine the most appropriate working methods.

12. The value of such an exchange would be to identify best practices, ongoing constraints or potential ways forward. The system of discussants or respondents could also be utilized, both for

panel presentations and for papers presented to the Forum in other contexts. A variety of participatory planning and problem-solving methods used in development could also be considered. The key principle would be to elicit the maximum amount of information from all participants in a creative environment, in order to enhance mutual understanding and ownership of the process and to facilitate the production of feasible and implementable recommendations to which United Nations bodies and their member States can respond in an effective and coordinated way.

13. In developing their dialogue with the United Nations system, members of the Forum will want to be aware of the differences between the organizations. They will need to take into account the fact that each organization or agency has its own governing body in which different government ministries may be represented. Thus, representatives from Ministries of Health make up the decision-making bodies at WHO and those of UNESCO of delegations from Ministries of Education, while the World Bank's governing body is composed of representatives of Ministries of Finance. Some organizations are decentralized, while in others most decisions are taken at headquarters level. Some are more policy oriented and others more operational. Budget cycles in the organizations also vary and are generally on a biennial basis. This means that any new activities involving expenditure would need to be approved by member States. The current United Nations biennium is 2002-2003 and the programme and budget for 2004-2005 will be decided at the end of 2003.

14. Notwithstanding the differences between the organizations of the United Nations system, there is a common understanding that issues relating to indigenous peoples merit special attention. Most organizations have programmes that involve indigenous peoples and several have specific policy directives guiding their work. Indigenous peoples generally participate in consultative processes in organizations of the United Nations system although the forms of that participation vary. Two cross-cutting themes that might be covered by the Forum are a review of existing United Nations-system policy guidelines on indigenous peoples and mechanisms for indigenous participation and consultation.

15. The provisional agenda provides for a general debate on activities of the United Nations system relating to indigenous peoples. Such a broad approach seems appropriate for the first session of the Forum. However, in future years it may be fruitful to introduce thematic sub-items so as to ensure a focused and action-oriented discussion. It would also allow for better pre-sessional planning by participating United Nations organizations and agencies.

16. The Forum will produce recommendations for the Economic and Social Council and the participating organizations of the United Nations system will certainly be ready to provide advice on technical matters. In particular, the Inter-agency Support Group established to assist the Forum has a strong interest and commitment to the Forum, looks forward to practical proposals that can be taken up and implemented, and reiterates its hope that a productive relationship can be established between the Forum and the United Nations system in the years ahead.